

Joy and Expectation?

Sermon December 14, 2008

The Reverend Elton O. Smith, Jr.

St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

Welcome to a wonderland of possibilities in the themes for this third Sunday of Advent, these Sundays of preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ into living history.

I say this is a wonderland of possibilities because several different highlights seem to emerge but not necessarily relate to each other. One of these themes is the portrayal of John the Baptist's personality and role in the preparation to receive and perceive the meaning of Jesus Christ as the Son of God—Son of God, yet born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn.

The possibilities and expectations are bound to be confused by the portrayal of John the Baptist, who was a sort of a “hinge person” between Old and New Testament prophets. Now in Advent we are beginning a “B” lectionary series of bible readings. But if this was next year's “C” selections for Advent III we would hear that the people were filled with expectation—but what do they get from John the Baptist? He says that his hearers are all a brood of vipers, who couldn't flee from the wrath to come, that they're like chaff to be burned with unquenchable fire” And then finally that passage we'll read next year ends, “So, with many other exhortations.... he proclaimed the good news to the people!” This Advent we certainly need good news—but we don't necessarily like the way God's messengers send it!

When I was dean of the Episcopal Cathedral in Buffalo we had someone dress as St. John the Baptist who comes onto to the stage of bible history as a rough hewn bearded figure stomping down the cathedral aisle shouting, “REPENT!”== What a way to get ready for Christmas!

Indeed there is a wonderland of possibilities when even Tchaikovsky's “Nutcracker Suite” becomes one of the “traditions” of the Christmas season. You may guess from all of this that I have a hard time sometimes with Advent. But all in all I do like this season just because it's different in the church than in the culture around us—as it proposes and advocates *waiting* and *hoping* with *anticipation*, rather than immediate gratification which all the Christmas advertising promises.

I like it that Advent asks us to prepare ourselves, our inner lives, rather than simply decorating our outer world with clothes and trinkets, colored wrapping paper and cascading Christmas lights.

But don't misunderstand—God help me, I also love the cultural glitter. I go with a friend every year to New York City in a sort of pilgrimage to see once again the Neapolitan Christmas tree at the Metropolitan Museum with surrounding rooms full of hundreds of classic paintings of Jesus birth, and appropriate Christmas hymns playing in the background.

Then from there I go down Fifth Avenue to the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree, stopping on the way to marvel at the Christmas displays in the windows of Bergdorf Goodman's. This is along with all of the other wondrous window displays of the color and light and imagination of Christmas scenes designed to draw us into the consumption world of Christmas, which I don't need practically but fascinates me visually.

So, don't misunderstand--I love some of the cultural glitter, but it's Advent that helps me see the subtext, the real meaning and power of this season. Back in the Advent service here helps me know that there is something more real more important, more substantial than the cultural expression. And Advent in church ***especially at a shocking time of lowered expectations*** in the news of the world around us, helps me live more in tune with a real, joyous, and substantial hope and expectation.

Now even more than usual, Advent in church means a lot to me, but it's been a struggle, because the world seems to be conspiring against it, especially with the financial uncertainties that one way or another affect everyone. It's not just the financial uncertainties that have ripple effects in local parish life—but also the reality that with reduced financial resources the Church cannot do what it wants to do to alleviate poverty, oppression, danger for the marginalized poor—all of which are growing in the world. We think we have it bad: the latest statistics are that one billion people around the world will go to bed hungry tonight---did last night, and will tomorrow night.

Now I'm looking more to the Church for hope and joyous expectations, for the world around has now changed so much. An editorial cartoon in the Washington Post by Tom Toles brought this home to me. A picture sometimes can tell more than a thousand words. The headline was "The American History Museum Reopens" and the cartoon is a crowd gathering around a big plastic bubble with a lovely home and two car garage inside, and underneath is the caption "The Postwar Boom 1946-2008" It's now a museum piece! And this "museum piece" of 62 years is most of the lifetimes of any of us!

This point about a “museum piece” takes me gently into another reality that has been brought home to me: we need a security and direction that can stand the test of time more than reliance on old ways of life, and even reliance on old holiday traditions to be anything more than just what they are—just traditions.

I thought of this after my holiday visit to New York City. The best of all department store window displays was the one entitled “Traditions” depicting Christmas scenes from about 75 years ago. Viewing those windows warmed my heart, but it helped me realize that old traditions are not enough now to help us respond to the the rapid changes all of us face and must live with.

I had a barber once who was Polish and his wife was Italian. Their family tradition was to go to one parents’ house for an Italian Christmas on Christmas Eve, and the other parents’ house for a Polish Christmas the next day. I have always wondered if these traditions actually helped the barber’s family be nourished either spiritually or psychologically.

What we all need is the hope, joy, and expectation of a world made NEW again. That is the theme that weaves through all of the bible, and especially through Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. The bible looks back in time only to show direction for moving toward the future.

That’s why I need the Advent lessons and hymns more this year than ever before. The Good News is that the true spirit of Christmas is one we always look **forward** to. It is NOT in old traditions of Christmas that we may or may not like to bring back into this holiday season.

So as Calvin and Hobbes said in their final comic strip, “It’s a magical world out there, Hobbes old buddy. Let’s go exploring!”

We need Advent to discover, as if for the first time, that the true spirit and meaning of Christmas became real, available for us in a baby’s flesh that first night. And that spirit grows as we nourish it and let it come alive in us today....and tomorrow....and the next day!

Amen.